MARGARET ATWOOD IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS

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Margaret Atwood, author of such a vast work comprising fiction, poetry and essays, is particularly well-known by Spanish readers for novels such as The Handmaid´s Tale, Surfacing and many others, However, most of her poetry and works of criticism have not yet been translated into Spanish. I have selected nine poems, from Interlunar (1984), Two-Headed Poems (1978), True Stories (1981) as compiled under the anthologies “Poems, 1978-86” (1992) and Morning in the Burned House (1995). The selection has attempted to show an approach to mystery and horror, which in my opinion is characteristic of MA´s works as a whole. They are the following:

Eurydice.....INTERLUNAR
Orpheus (1).....INTERLUNAR
Orpheus (2).....INERLUNAR
Night Poem.....TWO-HEADED POEMS
Owl Burning.....MORNING IN THE BURNED HOUSE
A Conversation.....TRUE STORIES
Letter From Persephone..... INTERLUNAR
Metempsychosis..... INTERLUNAR
No Name.....INTERLUNAR

In “Eurydice” and the two poems entitled “Orpheus” (1 & 2), mystery arises from the chosen subject itself, ie life beyond the pagan hell or “Hades” where Orpheus stands for all poets, for poetical voice. Two lines are particularly revealing as an end to the last stanza:

...They have cut off both his hands
and soon they will tear
his head from his body in one burst
of furious refusal.
He foresees this. Yet he will go on
singing, and in praise.
To sing is either praise
or defiance. Praise is defiance.

[Unabridged poems together with their translation into Spanish: see Section II].

Through the above lines, a poet is defined as a being who praises, therefore stands in defiance, despite world rejection and refusal, an individual who goes on singing in praise despite his foreseeing his own death (or sacrificial murder). The narration of the ancient myth is always helpful: Orpheus was indeed murdered by the Maenads, Bassarids who tore his head (later to be sent to Lesbos) from his body, during an orgiastic rite. It is also worth remembering that the name itself, Orpheus, means oraia phone, ie “the best voice”. (1)
A translation dilemma also arises through the lines “to sing is either praise/ or defiance”. Are they pointing at an irreconcilable antithesis, a disjunction of thought by which the two terms praise/defiance are given as opposites? They stand as equal terms in the last line “Praise IS defiance”, showing that M.A´s vision is prevailingly paradoxical in nature (2)

The mythological subject, as so often in M. A´s work, is completely recreated by her new approaches, where female characters come out of the shadows and step forward to the foreground to tell their own story, a story which usually replies to, counteracts and contrasts with the legendary (male) version. The poem “Eurydice” is told in the second person, by a voice.which is tenderly addressing the heroine:

“...O handful of gauze, little
bandage, handful of cold
air, it is not through him
you will get your freedom.”

That voice is also analyzing Eurydice’s relationship with Orpheus, through a kind of oracle structure, as an oracular counselor.

“...He cannot believe without seeing,
and it´s dark here.
Go back, you whisper,
but he wants to be fed again
by you.”

Cultural, literary and pictorial references, both explicit and implicit, are very abundant in MA´s poetry. The description of Hell given by the three above-quoted poems is based on Orpheus’s underground dwelling, as told by Ovid, enriched by visions of paintings by Pre-Renaissance and Renaissance Italian painters. However, another mythological poem, “Letter from Persephone” is brought to our present world, and explicitly addressed to American housewives living in the 1940s. By showing pagan gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, as our correspondents, so close to us and our own world, their symbolic power is reinforced and highlighted, recovered from arid academics and the solemnity of literary museums. Viewed as a reply to one another, “Eurydice” and “Orpheus” also recreate the subject of human perception and female/male relationships.
Again horror is an element of tragedy in the poem entitled “Owl Burning”, which resumes the thread of a series of poems about witch hunting. (3) “Owl Burning” is a brutal tale, being told by the executioner of an old peasant woman who has been denounced as a witch. Observers (in this case readers) are challenged by the furious rejection of the narrator herself (who turns into a collective “we” as spokesman for the community). After telling how they all got drunk when the old woman had been burnt to the bone, we are challenged by the last lines of the poem:

...She burned extremely, thick fat on fire.
Making grey screams. Giving back
to the air what she took when she shriveled us.

She might have saved herself
with her white owl’s voice
but we cut parts off her first

so she couldn’t fly.
The fingers, those are the wings.
We watched her smolder and got drunk after.

Her heart was the ember
we used to relight our stoves.
This is our culture,

no business of yours.
You have soft feet.
You don’t know what it’s like,
so close to bedrock.

Horror is only felt by us, readers/observers, who witness this expansion from ignorance and resentment, like another heart of darkness which does not belong to a single character and may not be assigned to a legendary tyrant in exile. Horror here is social horror, such as

portrayed in the poem “A Conversation”, where through irony and sarcasm we are introduced to a vulgar situation which is horrific because of what is suggested, glimpsed at, through a smart conversation between a gentleman and his lady escorts. This poems ends in two lines

“What could I do?
she said. Why was he at the party?”

which are the bored monologue of one of the ladies, a part of our world made up by sunglasses, sports shirts, tourist beaches and manufacturers of torture machines. Social horror is also the subject of the series of poems turning around poetry, particularly against women, such as “Torture”, “A Woman’s Issue” or “Notes Towards a Poem Which Can Never Be Written” (from True Stories,).
Thus both in “Owl Burning” and “A Conversation”, violence and death are accounted for by the environment, of which they are a part.
The poem “No Name” is apparently just another descriptive or narrative poem, almost pictorial through its lists of items, such as a door where the man rests, the kitchen where the female is standing, with a table, a chair , a fruit-bowl and a plate with loaves of bread. Yet this “still nature” turns into a nightmare:

“The door is half open
or half closed. It remains so
and you can’t wake up.”

Uncertainty is shown by that door which is neither closing to let the man come in or turn him outdoors nor opening to reveal whether the man is dead or alive. The protagonist of this poem is a very common woman, someone who has carried on a “blameless” life, who has no name either and could be a collective “us”, a female voice who is to state in “Romantic” (from Morning in the Burned House)

“… Still, who’s taken in?
Every time?
Us, and our empty hands, the hands
of starving nurses.
It’s bullet holes we want to see in their skin,
scars, and the chance to touch them.”

The narrative plot within this poem (“No Name”) shows associations with well-known patterns of ghost stories, lovers returning from the grave, such as in Ambrose Bierce`s classic tale about a dead soldier, undoubtedly known by MA.
Less involved in social criticism and therefore more suggestive and mysterious is the poem entitled “Night Poem”, where we are watched by our “true parents” who have crawled from a cold lake to foresee our future. This poem is narrated by the night parents themselves, those who are awaiting

knowing we are only
the wavering shadows thrown
by one candle, in this echo
you will hear twenty years later.

Finally, let us mention a more symbolic poem belonging to a series (“Snake Poems”) where souls transmigrate to snake bodies: “Metempsychosis”.

...though some tire soon of being born
over and over; for them there’s the breath
that shivers in the yellow grass,
a papery finger, half of a noose, a summons
to the dead river.

Notes:

[1. See Giovanni Boccaccio, “Genealogy of Pagan Gods”, Vth Book, Chapter XII]
[2. For a different approach, see Sherrill E. Grace, “Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood”, Montreal: Vehicle Press, 1978)].
[3. For example, “Harvest” from Interlunar, and also “Half-Hanged Mary” from Morning in the Burned House].

SECTION II

Original poems followed by their translations into Spanish:

EURYDICE
He is here, come down to look for you.
It is the song that calls you back,
a song of joy and suffering
equally: a promise:
that things will be different up there
than they were last time.
You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,
emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace
of the deepest sea, which is easier
than the noise and flesh of the surface.
You are used to these blanched dim corridors,
you are used to the king
who passes you without speaking.
The other one is different
and you almost remember him.
He says he is singing to you
because he loves you,
not as you are now,
so chilled and minimal: moving and still
both, like a white curtain blowing
in the draft from a half-opened window
beside a chair on which nobody sits.
He wants you to be what he calls real.
He wants you to stop light.
He wants to feel himself thickening
like a treetrunk or a haunch
and see blood on his eyelids
when he closes them, and the sun beating.
This love of his is not something
he can do if you aren’t there,
but what you knew suddenly as you left your body
cooling and whitening on the lawn
was that you love him anywhere,
even in this land of no memory,
even in this domain of hunger.
You hold love in your hand, a red seed
you had forgotten you were holding.
He has come almost too far.
He cannot believe without seeing,
and it’s dark here.
Go back, you whisper,
but he wants to be fed again
by you. O handful of gauze, little
bandage, handful of cold
air, it is not through him
you will get your freedom.

ORPHEUS (1)
You walked in front of me,
pulling me back out
to the green light that had once
grown fangs and killed me.
I was obedient, but
numb, like an arm
gone to sleep; the return
to time was not my choice.
By then I was used to silence.
Though something stretched between us
like a whisper, like a rope:
my former name,
drawn tight.
You had your old leash
with you, love you might call it,
and your flesh voice.
Before your eyes you held steady
the image of what you wanted
me to become: living again.
It was this hope of yours that kept me following.
I was your hallucination, listening
and floral, and you were singing me:
already new skin was forming on me
within the luminous misty shroud
of my other body; already
there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.
I could see only the outline
of your head and shoulders,
black against the cave mouth,
and so could not see your face
at all, when you turned
and called to me because you had
already lost me. The last
I saw of you was a dark oval.
Though I knew how this failure
would hurt you, I had to
fold like a gray moth and let go.
You could not believe I was more than your echo.

ORPHEUS (2)
Whether he will go on singing
or not, knowing what he knows
of the horror of this world:
He was not wandering among meadows
all this time. He was down there
among the mouthless ones, among
those with no fingers, those
whose names are forbidden,
those washed up eaten into
among the gray stones
of the shore where nobody goes
through fear. Those with silence.
He has been trying to sing
love into existence again
and he has failed.
Yet he will continue
to sing, in the stadium
crowded with the already dead

who raise their eyeless faces
to listen to him; while the red flowers
grow up and splatter open
against the walls.
They have cut off both his hands
and soon they will tear
his head from his body in one burst
of furious refusal.
He foresees this. Yet he will go on
singing, and in praise.
To sing is either praise
or defiance. Praise is defiance.

A WOMAN´S ISSUE

The woman in the spiked device
that locks around the waist and between
the legs, with holes in it like a tea strainer
is Exhibit A.

The woman in black with a net window
to see through and a four-inch
wooden peg jammed up
between her legs so she can't be raped
is Exhibit B.

Exhibit C is the young girl
dragged into the bush by the midwives
and made to sing while they scrape the flesh
from between her legs, then tie her thighs
till she scabs over and is called healed.
Now she can be married.
For each childbirth they'll cut her
open, then sew her up.
Men like tight women.
The ones that die are carefully buried.

The next exhibit lies flat on her back
while eighty men a night
move through her, ten an hour.
She looks at the ceiling, listens
to the door open and close.
A bell keeps ringing.
Nobody knows how she got here.

You'll notice that what they have in common
is "between the legs". Is this
why wars are fought?
Enemy territory, no man's
land, to be entered furtively,
fenced, owned but never surely,
scene of these desperate forays
at midnight, captures
and sticky murders, doctor's rubber gloves
greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the surge
of your own uneasy power.

This is no museum.
Who invented the word "love"?

NIGHT POEM

There is nothing to be afraid of,
it is only the wind
changing to the east, it is only
your father the thunder
your mother the rain
In this country of water
with its beige moon damp as a mushroom,
its drowned stumps and long birds
that swim, where the moss grows
on all sides of the trees
and your shadow is not your shadow
but your reflection,
your true parents disappear
when the curtain covers your door.
We are the others,
the ones from under the lake
who stand silently beside your bed
with our heads of darkness.
We have come to cover you
with red wool,
with our tears and distant whispers.
You rock in the rain's arms,
the chilly ark of your sleep,
while we wait, your night
father and mother,
with our cold hands and dead flashlight,
knowing we are only
the wavering shadows thrown
by one candle, in this echo
you will hear twenty years later.

METEMPSYCHOSIS

Somebody's grandmother glides through the bracken,
in widow's black and graceful
and sharp as ever: see how her eyes glitter!

Who were you when you were a snake?

This one was a dancer who is now
a green streamer waved by its own breeze
and here's your blunt striped uncle, come back
to bask under the wicker chairs
on the porch and watch over you.

Unfurling itself from its cast skin,
the snake proclaims resurrection
to all believers

though some tire soon of being born
over and over; for them there's the breath
that shivers in the yellow grass,
a papery finger, half of a noose, a summons
to the dead river.

Who's that in the cold cellar
with the apples and the rats? Whose is
that voice of a husk rasping in the wind?
Your lost child whispering Mother,
the one more child you never had,
your child who wants back in.

---
c) Margaret Atwood

SPANISH VERSIONS by Amparo Arróspide

EURIDICE
El ha venido a buscarte y está aquí,
canción que te llama y quiere que vuelvas,
canción de dicha y de pesar
a partes iguales, promesa
hecha canción, promesa
de que todo será, allá arriba, distinto
a la última vez...

Hubieras preferido seguir sintiendo nada,
vacío y silencio; la estancada paz
del mar más hondo,
al ruido y la carne de la superficie,
acostumbrada a estos pasillos pálidos y en sombras,
y al rey que pasa por tu lado
sin pronunciar palabra.
El otro es diferente
y casi lo recuerdas.
Dice que canta para ti
porque te ama,
no como eres ahora,
tan fría y diminuta: móvil
y a la vez quieta, como blanca cortina
o soplo en la corriente
de una ventana a medio abrir
junto a una silla donde nadie se sienta.
Te quiere “real",un cuerpo opaco,
sentir cómo se espesa
(tronco de árbol o ancas)
y el golpe de la sangre tras los párpados
al cerrarlos
la llamarada solar...sin tu presencia no podrá sentir
este amor suyo...Mas la súbita revelación
de tu cuerpo enfriándose en la tierra
fue saber que le amas en cualquier lugar
hasta en este sitio sin memoria,
este reino del hambre.
Como una semilla roja en la mano
que olvidaste que aprietas,
llevas tu amor...El necesita ver para creer
y está oscuro.
“Atrás, atrás...", le susurras,
pero quiere que vuelvas
a alimentarlo, Eurídice,
puñado de tul, pequeña venda,
soplo de aire frío,
no se llamará Orfeo
tu libertad... _

ORFEO (1)

Delante mío caminabas,
atrayéndome
hacia la verde luz que alguna vez
me asesinó con sus colmillos.

Insensible te seguí,
como un brazo dormido y obediente
pero no fui yo quien quiso
volver al tiempo
Había llegado a amar el silencio,
pero mi antiguo nombre era una cuerda
o un susurro tendido
entre nosotros.
Y estaba tu amor,
las viejas riendas de tu amor,
tu voz corpórea…Ante tus ojos mantenías
la imagen de tu deseo, que era yo,
viva otra vez.
Y por esta esperanza tuya continué,
y así fui
tu alucinación, floral
y oyente
tú me creabas
al cantarme y una piel nueva me crecía
en mi otro cuerpo, envuelto en niebla,
y tenía ya sed, y manos sucias,
y veía ya,
perfilados contra la boca de la gruta,
el perfil de tu cabeza y de tus hombros
cuando te diste vuelta para llamarme
y me perdiste…Así que no llegué a ver tu rostro,
sólo un ovalo oscuro,
y a pesar de sentir todo el dolor
de tu derrota, debí rendirme,
como se rinden las mariposas de la noche.
Tú creíste
que sólo fui el eco
de tu canto.

ORFEO (2)
Sabiendo lo que sabe
del horror de este mundo,
¿seguirá cantando?
No se dedicó únicamente
a pasear los prados: bajó
con los que no tienen boca,
los que no tienen dedos,
los de nombres prohibidos,
los cuerpos devorados
en guijarros grises
de una costa desierta
que todos temen,
con los dueños del silencio

El, que quiso inútilmente
resucitar a la amada con su canto,
seguirá allí,
en el estadio lleno de los muertos
que elevarán sus rostros sin ojos
para escucharle, mientras crecen
las flores y revientan, rojas,
contra los muros.
Le habrán cortado las manos
y pronto desgajarán
su cabeza del cuerpo

en un estallido
de rechazo furioso: y aunque lo sabe
proseguirá su canto de alabanza
porque cantar es alabanza o desafío.
Y toda alabanza es desafío.

POEMA NOCTURNO
No hay nada que temer,
es sólo el viento
que ahora sopla hacia el este, es sólo
tu padre.....el true no
tu madre.....la lluvia
En este país de agua
con su luna ocre y húmeda como un champiñón,
sus muñones ahogados y sus pájaros largos
que nadan, donde crece el musgo
por todo el tronco de los árboles
y tu sombra no es tu sombra
sino un reflejo,
tus padres verdaderos desaparecen
al bajar la cortina
y quedamos los otros,
los sumergidos del lago
con nuestras cabezas de oscuridad
de pie ahora y en silencio junto a tu cama…Venimos a arroparte
con lana roja,
con nuestras lágrimas y susurros distantes.
Te meces en los brazos de la lluvia,
el arca fría de tu sueño,
mientras aguardamos, tu padre
y madre nocturnos,
con las manos heladas y una linterna muerta,
sabiendo que somos solamente
las sombras vacilantes que proyecta
una vela, en este eco
que oirás veinte años más tarde.

METEMPSICOSIS/METEMPSYCHOSIS
Tu abuela se desliza por los helechos,
vestida de luto, grácil
y aguda como siempre: ¡mira cómo le brillan los ojos!

¿Quién eras tú cuando fuiste serpiente?
Aquel fue un bailarín y ahora
una verde serpentina ondulada por su propia brisa
y he aquí a tu tío, persona brusca y a rayas,
que regresa a vigilarte
y relajarse bajo las mecedoras
del porche.
Cuando se despoja de su vieja piel
la serpiente proclama la resurrección
a todos los creyentes
aunque hay quienes se cansan pronto
de nacer y renacer… para ellos es el soplo
que tiembla en la hierba amarilla,
un dedo de papel, la mitad de un lazo,
la cita para acudir al río muerto.
¿Quién se refugia en la bodega fría

con las manzanas y las ratas?
¿De quién es esa voz de pellejo
que se crispa al viento?
...Del hijo que perdiste y que susurra “Madre",el que jamás pariste
y quiere volver a entrar.

SIN NOMBRE/NO NAME
Una pesadilla te asalta con frecuencia:
llega un hombre herido, por la noche,
a tu casa
-situas el agujero en el pecho, a la izquierda…Su sangre al brotar mancha
tu puerta, al apoyarse,
casi desvaneciéndose…Quiere que le dejes entrar.
Es como el alma de un amante
muerto y resucitado
hambriento aún
sólo que no está muerto. Y aunque el vello en tus brazos
se eriza y un aire frío
que de él proviene
cruza tu umbral,
no has visto a nadie más vivo que él
cuando te toca, apenas roza tu mano
con la izquierda suya, su mano limpia,
y un “por favor” susurra,
en cualquier idioma…Tú no eres médico ni nada parecido.
Has llevado una vida normal,
lo que un observador llamaría “sin tacha”.Detrás, en la mesa,
hay un cuenco con fruta,
una silla, un cuchillo,
un plato con pan…Es primavera, y el viento de la noche
huele, húmedo, a marga removida
y a flores tempranas.
La luna irradia su belleza
que como belleza ves al fin,
tan cálida y ofreciéndolo todo.
… Sólo hay que tomarlo.
Oyes ladrar perros distantes.
La puerta está entreabierta
o entrecerrada:
así permanece y tú no puedes despertar.

CARTA DE PERSEFONE/LETTER FROM PERSEPHONE
Escribo esta carta, yo, Perséfone,
a las madres zurdas
con sus mantones de flecos negros
y delantales de flores
de los años cuarenta,
con sus zapatillas rosas,
las uñas lacadas de rojo y los nudillos
débiles
que tocaron el piano alguna vez…Sé de vuestras plantas domésticas
que se marchitaban,
de vuestros muslos gordos
que apretábais con cintas, hendidos
por la mitad
y sé
de las batallas de mutilados
que llamabais sexo,
bajo sábanas de hospital
de las que nunca se habló…Sé de vuestras propias madres

inválidas, de vuestro aburrimiento
y el brillo enfurecido del parquet,
sé de vuestros padres,
que hubiesen querido hijos varones,
hijos que vuestros cuerpos al fin pronunciarían,
estas palabras
previsibles, estos
tartamudeos de la carne…

Conversación/A Conversation
El hombre camina por la playa del sur
con gafas de sol, camisa informal
y dos bellas mujeres.
Es fabricante de máquinas
para arrancar las uñas de los pies
y enviar descargas eléctricas
a los cerebros o los genitales.
Sólo las vende: no ensaya ni presencia.
“Mi querida señora", le dice,
“Con esa clase de gente no hay modo:
no entienden otra cosa”."¿Y qué podía hacer yo?", dice ella,
“¿Por qué estaba este hombre en la fiesta?”

QUEMA DE LECHUZAS/OWL BURNING
Unos centímetros más abajo se acaba el suelo
como puerta con cerrojo. Una helada dura y adiós
lo no cosechado.
¿Con qué derecho chupa una vieja
las negras raíces, el rojo jugo que deben
ser para los niños?
Practicaba la magia, claro está.
Cuando se tiene tanta hambre
hacen falta garfios y garras.
A medianoche retenía el aliento, descruzaba los dedos
y le salían plumas de lechuza por todo el cuerpo,
como moho en la carne, sólo que más rápido.
Yo misma la vi cazando ratones
a la luz de la luna, silenciosa
como la sombra de la mano que proyecta una vela.
Buen disfraz, sin embargo la reconocí
al día siguiente por la pluma blanca
en el pelo.
Ardió muy bien, grasa gorda al fuego,
con grises gritos, devolviendo al aire
lo que nos quitó mientras nos resecaba.
Podría haberse salvado
con su voz de lechuza blanca,
pero antes le cortamos ciertas partes
para que no volase,
como los dedos, esas alas secretas… La miramos arder hasta el hueso, y nos emborrachamos después. Su corazón
nos sirvió de brasa para reavivar la lumbre.
Así es nuestra cultura, nada que les importe
a ustedes, gente de pies suaves que ignoran
lo que es vivir pegados a la piedra.